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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 007124

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM PINR RS

SUBJECT: PUTIN MEETS WITH NGO REPRESENTATIVES AS PART OF CIVIL G8

REF: MOSCOW 2502

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons: 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The main GOR-sponsored civil society event, the Civil G8, was held July 3-4 in Moscow. The event brought together a wide range of NGOs for lively discussions on themes, including G8 agenda items as well as the state of Russia's civil society. Putin attended several Civil G8 events with NGOs, and spent a total of nearly three hours in discussions with them. Many participants characterized these encounters as positive. Putin promised that he would work to change controversial NGO legislation if it became too burdensome. Putin appeared relaxed and confident, responding to questions and statements by NGO representatives. END SUMMARY.

CIVIL G8

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¶2. (SBU) The main GOR-sponsored civil society event -- the Civil -- G8 --was held on July 3-4 in Moscow. Ella Pamfilova, Chair of the Presidential Council for Assistance to Development of Institutions of Civil Society and Human Rights, served as coordinator. The event was a follow up to the previous Civil G8, which was held in March (reftel). A wide variety of organizations attended -- Memorial, Carnegie Center for International Peace, the Center for Development of Democracy and Human Rights, Greenpeace, the Woods Hole Research Center, Human Rights First, and Oxfam. According to a list provided to the Embassy, there were over 270 foreign participants.

¶3. (C) In the opening plenary session, Pamfilova noted the presence of NGO representatives from all G8 countries as well as Brazil, the Baltic states, Senegal, South Africa and the CIS states. Many participants told us they were amazed by the resources that the GOR apparently was willing to spend on the event. Nigel Martin, President of the Forum International de Montreal, whose organization claims to have organized the first G8 NGO conference in 2002, told us that the level of GOR support was unprecedented. He also speculated that one possible motivation for such support was the GOR's desire to show the world that civil society in Russia was healthy and vibrant.

¶4. (C) After the initial plenary the participants broke into sub-groups to discuss the themes for this year's G8 previous G8 issues, and topics that the NGOs wanted to place on the agenda. At the request of NGOs, Pamfilova added four roundtable discussions on human rights. Demos Center's Tatyana Lokshina expressed satisfaction that human rights NGOs were allowed to decide whom to invite to these roundtables and to choose the topics for discussion. These roundtables examined subjects such as restrictions on human rights under the guise of the war against terror and overall relations between governments and NGOs. The roundtables that

Embassy observers attended featured lively discussions.

PUTIN'S PLENARY SESSION WITH NGOS

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¶5. (C) On July 4, Putin attended a plenary session with NGOs representative, attended by several hundred representatives and members of the press. For nearly two hours, Putin listened and responded to presentations on topics ranging from genetically modified food to Iran's nuclear program. On Iran, Putin said he hoped the Iranians would accept the nuclear program proposals put before them prior to the G8 summit but also acknowledged that it might not be possible. Putin also warned of the danger of non-nuclear ballistic missiles and reiterated his call for more discussions on reducing strategic nuclear weapons. Responding to concerns about Russia's recent NGO legislation, Putin said he would act to change it if it became too burdensome. He also noted that the GOR had consulted with the Council of Europe on the legislation and that the main intention was not to restrict NGOs but to bring order to the NGO sector. However, Putin also repeated previous statements that he objected to foreign government funding of political activity in Russia.

¶6. (C) Putin appeared relaxed and confident, responding to NGO questions and concerns on sensitive topics like Chechnya. He adroitly handled an outburst by anti-nuclear protesters who stood on their chairs to shout: "No to nuclear power stations." The protesters, who had the same slogan taped on their shirts, were permitted to remain in the hall, Putin said they should be allowed to express their views. Responding like a Western politician on the campaign trail, Putin deftly complied with a request to wear a button from Russian NGO Perspektiva to indicate his support for inclusive

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education.

PUTIN'S MEETING WITH NGO AND BUSINESS LEADERS

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¶7. (C) Putin later held a smaller meeting with the heads of a number of major international NGOs, such as Amnesty International, Transparency International, Human Rights Watch, and the World Wildlife Fund. No media were present. Allison Gill of Human Rights Watch told us that the NGOs wanted to discuss four main issues -- energy and climate change, development and poverty elimination, human rights and security, and the Russian NGO legislation. The tone of the meeting was reportedly positive, although light on specific promises, with Putin again reiterating support for NGOs. When told that foreign NGOs might have to report their intention to hold press conferences a month in advance, Putin appeared surprised and said that was not part of the legislation, although he stated that it might be part of the implementing regulations.

¶8. (C) Tatyana Monaghan of the International Chamber of Commerce in Russia told the Ambassador that she was impressed with Putin's performance during his July 4 meeting with the representatives of the International Chamber of Commerce. At that meeting he asserted the importance of civil society in Russia and reiterated his previous remarks that he would fix problems that emerged from the implementation of the NGO legislation. Putin stressed that the GOR was serious about taking steps to solve the problem of intellectual property rights protection. Monaghan said Putin displayed a strong grasp of the facts and details on the issues raised in the meeting. She also noted that businessman Oleg Deripaska attended the meeting but was largely silent throughout the proceedings.

COMMENT

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¶9. (C) The Civil G8 and the events surrounding it were

obviously part of the Kremlin's efforts to dampen criticism of the GOR's approach to civil society development prior to the G8 summit. The event did allow independent NGOs the opportunity to present their views directly to Putin on topics of their choosing and to obtain a public response from the President. Putin himself appeared to have impressed many of his critics in the NGO community with his lively and well informed performance at the meetings. Whether such interaction has any long-term significance remains to be seen, but Putin's willingness to hold such meetings with civil society representatives was a positive sign.

BURNS